

Status of Virginia's Prisoner Reentry Initiative – May 2005

Virginia's approach to reentry is to identify barriers to successful community reintegration and to determine appropriate responses. An appointed workgroup sought to:

- Identify needs that require attention during the period of incarceration
- Establish an inventory of programs designed to address those needs
- Review how the transition from prison environment and control to community life is managed prior to release
- Review how transition is managed upon release
- Identify programs we have to manage issues that arise after release
- Identify what we can do to improve outcomes after transition

The following notes several measures Virginia has taken to date. Our first objective was to ensure that we are making the best use of existing resources to meet these needs. While public safety always comes first, successful reentry extends well beyond public safety agencies and resources. State, local and non-profit entities all play key roles, and insufficient communication and coordination of services limits opportunities for success. A new **dedicated Reentry Coordinator** position was created to facilitate communication and follow-up across the many organizations that comprise the reentry work group.

While the Offender is Incarcerated

The Department of Corrections (DOC) has completed a pilot and adopted a **standardized risk assessment instrument**, completed during the initial classification process when the offender enters prison, designed to identify required programming prior to release. Procurement of the instrument is in progress.

While incarcerated, programming will be better timed to address institutional needs early on, while preparing for reentry in the period leading up to release from prison. The 2005 General Assembly approved funding to **increase space, equipment and instructors for both GED and vocation skills** at three prisons from which large numbers of inmates are traditionally released.

Because most offenders rely on family support in the first months after release, DOC is attempting to facilitate improved family communications. It recently released a handbook on visitation expectations and rules to inmate families. It also expanded a project that provides for videotapes from inmates to children ('**Messages from Mom/Dad**') to five prisons. At the same time, the Department of Social Services (DSS) is developing an **adult-to-adult and family-to-family mentoring program**, which will begin preparing families and inmates for reunification up to 6 months prior to release, and will extend up to 12 months after release.

The Transitional Process

Several steps have been taken to improve preparation for release. The **Productive Citizenship** curriculum has been revised and expanded and is currently being evaluated. Several additional prerelease initiatives have been implemented that seek to smooth out the transition process. These include a **jail-based transition program**, where offenders are moved from prison to the jail in their communities about 90 days prior to release. They participate in Productive Citizenship and other programming during the first 45 days, and work release during the last 45 days. This allows for additional family and probation staff visitation, and provides greater job opportunities upon release. Eight such programs currently exist, and new funding will expand the program to 15 jails by the end of fiscal year 2006.

Funding has also been provided to **increase community based pre/post release contract beds** – a six-month program (3 pre-release and 3 post-release), including a substance abuse treatment component, providing beds for up to 200 additional offenders. Additionally, DOC and the Department of Rehabilitative Services are planning to utilize available space at the state's residential rehabilitation facility to **allow appropriate inmates with disabilities to receive services, training, and placement assistance** at the facility.

Because an estimated 15% of inmates have continuing needs for mental health services after release, a **memorandum of understanding has been signed between the DOC, the Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services, and each of the local Community Service Boards** throughout the state to provide for a coordinated assessment of needs prior to and at the time of release. A series of meetings have also been conducted to improve a memorandum of understanding between the DOC, the Department of Rehabilitative Services, and the Social Security Administration to improve the process **for those who may qualify for disability services and benefits** upon release.

The DOC has modified procedures to allow inmates to obtain key documents, such as a birth certificate and photo identification that will be required for job search, housing, etc. upon release.

What Happens After Release?

Offenders return to their communities under a set of probation or parole rules. Probation officers monitor compliance with the rules, and provide offenders with assistance in transitioning from inmate to citizen status. Basic **probation/parole officer training** has been modified to incorporate evidence-based practices designed to improve communications, and to better identify programs that improve success rates. **Evidence-based practices** have been implemented at four pilot probation/parole districts (Lynchburg, Charlottesville, Williamsburg, and Winchester). Additionally, after receiving 25 new probation officer positions at the 2004 legislative session, the DOC **created two specialized POs, with mental health/substance abuse credentials**, in a

pilot effort to develop and measure interventions designed to reduce the numbers of technical violations.

Several steps have been taken to address the numbers of offenders being returned to prison for technical violations of their probation. While some violations may indicate a threat to the public and warrant reincarceration of the offenders. However, other violations may better be addressed through sanctions in the community, including programs to improve the chances that offenders will become productive citizens. The Virginia Sentencing Commission has developed a **risk-assessment instrument to identify violators who present a risk of reoffending**, as well as those who present a low risk. With **funding to initiate new local jail-based programs**, violators may now receive both a sanction and corrective programming, increasing the likelihood that they will complete their transition.

Coordinating Services at the Local Level

In four pilot programs, beginning in September 2005, local Departments of Social Services are taking the lead in developing **local reentry boards**, coordinating agencies that provide services that are accessed by offenders. Each department is associating with a specific prison that releases offenders to its locally, and will begin visiting the facilities (and the inmates) prior to reentry. Primary principles are integrated service delivery and interagency collaboration.

Virginia, currently operating a SAVORI program in Fairfax County, recently expanded to a second site in Newport News.

Other Activities

A statewide **conference on housing for offenders**, jointly sponsored by the Policy Academy workgroups for Reentry and for Chronic Homelessness, was held in April 2005.

The Department of Correctional Education has created a new Youth Transition Coordinator position to improve the transition of juveniles from the Department of Juvenile Justice back to their homes and local schools.

Recent Legislation

At the 2005 General Assembly, legislation was passed which:

- Creates a joint Senate/House subcommittee to study reentry.
- Codifies the ongoing reentry effort through the Office of the Secretary of Public Safety.
- Requires development of mental health transition plans for incarcerated juveniles.
- Allows offenders convicted of drug possession, who were previously ineligible for food stamps, to qualify - provided would otherwise be eligible and are meeting court imposed and treatment requirements.

Description of Virginia Reentry Initiatives, as of May 2005

Dedicated Reentry Coordinator position for State Reentry Committee

Program: Create position through Department of Corrections, to work with multiple state, local and non-profit agencies coordinating plans and services.

Status: Position created and filled in fall of 2004.

State Inmate Jail Transition Programs

Program: Contracts with local jails to house state inmates during their final 90 days of incarceration. First 45 days include programs preparing offenders for returning to non-custodial lives; second 45 days in work release. Allows local probation officers to meet with offenders prior to release, for reestablishment of family ties, and for offenders to obtain work and funds prior to release.

Status: Funding received from legislature for 10 sites to begin through June 30, 2005, as well as funding for additional 5 sites in the fiscal year ending 2006.

Improve knowledge of visitation rules for inmates' families

Program: Provide additional information to families to reduce difficulties encountered in inmate visitation.

Status: Developed informational handbook and made it available on agency website.

Expand "Messages from Mom/Dad video project

Program: Allows inmates to send children videotaped messages from incarcerated parents.

Status: Expanded to 5 prisons.

Conduct evaluation of "Productive Citizenship" curriculum

Program: Productive Citizenship instructs inmates in key areas necessary for successful return to communities.

Status: Preliminary program evaluation indicates small but increased success rate (reduced recidivism) for offenders who participated.

Increasing options for working with technical violators in their communities

Programs: Increased use of electronic monitoring in lieu of return to prison or jail; development of technical violator centers.

Status: Received funding to expand electronic monitoring contracts; budget language and funding adopted by legislature at 2005 Session for pilot programs of up to 150 total beds (per day) in fiscal year 2006 in local jails to house violators in a night incarceration program (allowed to work, attend treatment or educational programs during days). Contracts are being negotiated.

Adoption of Risk-Assessment instrument for judges to determine which violators can be placed in their communities, rather than returned to prison

Program: Through use of instrument and sentencing guidelines, increase opportunities to work with offenders, who pose minimal risk of reoffending, in their communities.

Status: Virginia Criminal Sentencing Commission adopted guidelines in November 2004. Pilot courts will use instrument in or near those localities that establish technical violator centers as noted above.

Modifications to Probation and Parole Officer Basic Training

Program: Add exposure to evidence based means for increasing success by offenders in their communities, while continuing emphasis on identifying technical violations that indicate an increased threat to public safety.

Status: Modifications in process of being implemented.

Memos of Understanding between all local Community Service Boards, Department of Corrections, and Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation, and Substance Abuse Services

Program: Develop MOU to address coordinated assessment and development of service plans for offenders prior to release from incarceration.

Status: MOU completed and signed by all entities this past winter. Workgroup currently implementing the agreements.

Memorandum of Understanding between Departments of Corrections, Rehabilitative Services and Social Security Administration addressing processing of eligibility for Social Security Disability for offenders

Program: Work out process for completing elements necessary to determine eligibility prior to release from incarceration.

Status: Implementation details progressing.

Pilot programs for local reentry boards

Program: Local Departments of Social Services take lead in coordinating agencies that provide services to ex-inmates upon return to communities. Pilots will be developed around two primary principles, integrated service delivery and interagency collaboration. Included will be meetings with offenders prior to release to provide information on services and resources available upon return to the community.

Status: Four local DSS agencies have agreed to lead pilots. Each will be tied to a specific prison from which inmates are released to their localities. Program details will be developed by July 2005, with pilots beginning in September 2005.

Increase number of transitional beds for offenders completing prison sentences

Program: Provide community housing for pre/post release (90 days of each), including treatment-oriented programs for inmates completing the substance abuse therapeutic community prison program.

Status: Legislature provided funding at its 2004 Session to allow the Department of Corrections to contract for an additional 80-100 transitional beds. DOC is also working with the Department of Rehabilitative Services to utilize available housing at its residential campus for pre and post release programming for inmates who qualify for rehab services – including vocational training, life skills, counseling, and job placement.

Risk Assessment Instrument for Inmate Needs

Program: Adopt a standard risk assessment instrument for inmates entering the prison system, to determine, based on common criteria, what programs and treatment will be needed while incarcerated.

Status: Pilot completed. Procurement of selected instrument in progress.

Key documents needed by inmates at time of release

Program: Obtain necessary documents (such as birth certificate) and provide photo identification for inmates leaving prison, to allow them to apply for various forms of assistance, employment, housing, etc.

Status: Program in place since spring of 2004. Continuing work with Department of Health to expedite issuance of birth certificates.

Work with Policy Academy on Homelessness to address offender housing needs

Program: Develop interface with academy working on chronic homelessness to provide assistance for offenders.

Status: Reentry Academy members are part of Homelessness Academy work group. Co-sponsored conference held April 7, 2005, bringing together statewide entities (state, local, non-profit and faith-based) to encourage formation of partnerships.

Increase Vocational and GED programming at prisons from which large numbers of inmates are released

Program: Increase job readiness of offenders prior to return to communities.

Status: Additional funding provided by 2005 General Assembly to increase space, equipment and teachers at three prisons with high release rates.

Expand SAVORI program to an additional locality

Program: Begin second SAVORI program – in Newport News, Va.

Status: Program began May 1, 2005.

Family Mentoring

Program: The Virginia Department of Social Services is developing an adult-to-adult and family-to-family mentoring program specifically designed for use with offenders returning to the community or for both offenders and their families. Three modules are being developed. One will be for the mentors, one for mentoring project managers/supervisors and one for mentor trainers. The program design covers a mentoring relationship with the offender and his or her family for an eighteen-month period beginning six months before the inmate is released. The curriculum will be made available for use by public and community based agencies working with reentry.

Status: Curriculum development is scheduled for completion in July. Family mentoring will be incorporated in the pilot programs to be lead by local social services agencies and mentors will be recruited from community and faith-based organizations in those localities. Staff of Virginia's Faith-Based and Community Initiative will begin mentor recruitment in June.

Utilize evidence based practices to improve offender/PO communications

Program: Work with researcher at Virginia Commonwealth University to implement evidence based practices at four pilot sites to improve communications between POs and offenders to reduce technical violations/recidivism.

Status: Staff trained and program implemented in Lynchburg, Charlottesville, Williamsburg and Winchester District offices over early spring, 2005.

Create new community positions to work with offenders with mental health/substance abuse histories

Program: Create new PO positions with MH/SA credentials in two district offices to work with offenders considered most vulnerable for violating.

Status: New type of PO created and filled in Roanoke and Norfolk districts in January/February, 2005.

Create new Youth Transition Coordinator position in Department of Correctional Education

Program: New position to better coordinate reentry of juvenile offenders, particularly between institutional school and local schools.

Status: Position created April 2005.

Reentry Related Legislation passed by 2005 General Assembly:

- SJR 273 – Creates joint subcommittee of House and Senate to study the Commonwealth's program for prisoner reentry.
- HB 1763 – Codifies the ongoing reentry effort by requiring the Secretary of Public Safety to establish an integrated system for coordinating the planning and provision of offender transitional and reentry services between state, local and non-profit agencies.
- HB 1765 – Requires the Department of Corrections to offer debit or prepaid telephone system, as well as the existing collect calling system, to increase the contacts between inmates and families.
- HB 1761 – Allows offenders convicted of drug possession, who previously were denied eligibility for food stamps, to qualify for such assistance provided they meet court imposed and treatment requirements.
- SB 843 – Requires development of mental health transition plans for incarcerated juveniles.